DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 291 740 SP 030 027

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TITLE Homophobia, Lesbians, and Women's Sports: An Exploratory Analysis.
PUB DATE 29 Aug 87
NOTE 21p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association (95th, New York, NY, August 29, 1987).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Athletic Coaches; Elementary Secondary Education; Feminism; Higher Education; *Lesbianism; Physical Education Teachers; *Research Needs; *Sex Stereotypes; *Social Attitudes; *Womens Athletics
IDENTIFIERS *Homophobia

ABSTRACT

In addressing the subject of lesbian athletes, this paper discusses some ways in which sport psychologists, researchers and clinicians may constructively approach the issues. These include: (1) understand one's own homophobia and how it affects clinical work as a sport psychologist by studying the growing body of literature on the topic; (2) conduct educational programs for athletes, coaches, and administrators focusing on issues of diversity among athetic participants, with sexual orientation a prominent factor being addressed along with race, gender, and class; (3) broaden perspectives to include addressing issues of social justice, prejudice, and discrimination in sport as they relate to sexual orientation; (4) use professional journals to educate colleagues and legitimize an open dialogue; (5) clarify the confusing misuses of terms related to the construction of gender in the literature; and (6) pursue research on the topics of homophobia in sport and experiences of lesbians and gay men in athletics. Opportunities for research are suggested. Thirty-two references are listed. (JD)

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An Exploratory Analysis

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Presented at the 95th Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association at New York City, August 29, 1987 Presentation Time: 2 pm

SP030 027

Running Head: Homophobia, Lesbians, and Sports

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Homophobia, Lesbians, and Women's Sports: An Exploratory Analysis

In the spring of 1981 professional tennis champion and advocate for women's sports Billie Jean King publicly acknowledged a seven year lesbian relationship. Billie Jean's coming out was not voluntary, but prompted by an impending palimony suit by her ex-lover. This surprising revelation sparked extensive media and public response. Every major newspaper and news magazine covered the story and offered editorial comment on Billie Jean's handling of the situation and the issue of lesbians in sport in general (Axthelm, 1981; Hicks, 1981; Kirshenbaum, 1981; Lichtenstein, 1981; McCall, 1981; Morrow, 1981; Roberts, 1981; Vecsey, 1981). Billie Jean called her seven year affair a mistake, appeared at all news conferences with her forgiving and steadfast husband conspicuously by her side, and offered to step down as president of the women's professional tennis player's group to avoid embarrassing the other players. Many commentators praised Billie Jean for her honesty and sympathized with the awkwardness of her situation. Others, some feminists and many lesbians, condemned her failure to seize the moment to speak out more forcefully for the concerns of lesbian athletes.

The reactions of women in athletics to Billie Jean's predicament ranged from white knuckled, breath holding silence to quiet and hopeful speculation that, at long last, the issue of lesbianism in women's sport might be brought out in the open and discussed with some understanding and acceptance.

Following the initial blitz of media attention there was a feverish scramble by some journalists to find out "who is and who isn't" on the women's professional golf and tennis tours. The National Enquirer offered a large cash "reward" to any woman pro golfer who would reveal the identity of the lesbians on the tour (there were no takers). Sports Illustrated featured, in their annual bathing suit issue the following winter, a sensationalized expose of the accusations of lesbianism directed at the women's basketball coach at the University of South Carolina (Lieber & Kirshenbaum, 1982). This story prompted another rash underground snooping by sport journalists to identify other lesbian college coaches. The women's sport establishment, however, circled the wagons and, with closed mouths, waited out these eruptions of public scrutiny in nervous silence. Eventually, media attention drifted elsewhere.

The opportunity to initiate a dialogue and to educate those in and out of the world of women's sport about the effects of the intense homophobia in athletics passed with hardly a word from those who might have been expected to contribute some reasoned and compassionate discussion to balance the sensationalized muckraking efforts of the popular press. Feminists, sport psychologists, sport sociologists, physical education scholars, and leaders in women's sport organizations all failed to speak out. Business in the world of women's sports drifted back to usual; silence and denial about lesbians in sport coupled with a concerted effort to focus attention on the most "feminine" and heterosexual athletes. Despite the window of opportunity

provided by Billie Jean's public disclosure, the women's sports world remains a giant closet with athletes, coaches, physical education teachers, and administrators tiptoeing around the huge lavender elephant sleeping in the locker room. Not even the 1982 release of Robert Towne's movie, Personal Best starring Marielle Hemingway in the role of an Olympic calibre pentathlete who becomes involved in an explicitly portrayed lesbian relationship with another athlete could crack the wall of public silence among athletic women about lesbians in sport.

In tacit collusion, sport psychologists and other researchers in physical education and sport treat the issue of homophobia and lesbianism in sport as a taboo research topic. Perusal of the major publishing outlets for these researchers reveals a glaring void. Other than an unpublished master's thesis on homophobia among women college athletes, physical education majors, and nonathletes (Guthrie, 1982) and an earlier study of heterosexuality among women physical educators (Locke and Jensen, 1970), there is no research published on these topics. There is, however, an overwhelming profusion of studies on the sex role orientation (masculinity, femininity, and angrogyny) of women athletes in the physical education and sport psychology literature (Colker & Widom, 1980; Del Rey & Sheppard, 1981; Harris, 1979; Jackson & Marsh, 1986; Sage & Loudermilk, 1979; Snyder, Kivlin & Spreitzer, 1979; Uguccioni & Ballantyne, 1980). While perhaps tangentially related to sexual orientation and homophobia, sex role orientation research only hints at the issue of lesbianism in sport by allowing readers to apply the

generally accepted and erroneous assumption that all lesbians are masculine appearing (or androgynous) in interpreting the results of such studies. In addition, the continuing use of the concepts of masculinity and femininity in this research only serves to legitimize and lend credence to the appropriateness of grounding our descriptions of males and females in traditional sex roles without regard for their oppressive implications rather than transcending these socially prescribed categories altogether.

While the literature in feminist studies, psychology, and sociology does include research about lesbians, these scholars have largely neglected sport and athletics as a context for their investigations. Two exceptions are notable in feminist studies, Cobhan (1982) and Kidd (1983). Though not research, these two authors engage in analyses of lesbians in sport and compulsory heterosexuality in sport. Only two books focused on women in sport, both from a feminist perspective and written by women outside the fields of physical education, athletics, and psychology, address the issues of homophobia and lesbianism in sport. These are tne Sporting Woman by Boutilier and SanGiovanni (1983) and Out of Bounds: Women, Sport, and Sexuality by Lenskyj (1986).

The silence about lesbians in sport among sportswomen themselves and among those of us who study women's sport or work with women athletes and physical education teachers has profound implications for the future of women in sport. While some advocates for women's sports boast of the progress in expanding sport opportunities for women over the last fifteen years,

whatever gains have been made must be viewed in the context of the moral compromises we've made. Our silence about lesbians in sport has allowed a particularly virulent and persistent brand of homophobia to thrive in a morass of ignorance and fear where the professional lives and personal integrity of individual women are regularly sacrificed for the presumed good of women's athletics in general. Women's athletics is, in fact, held hostage to fear of the L-word. As long as women's athletics continues to deny that there are lesbians in sport and sport scholars avoid the topic, we will never control our sporting lives and will be forced to waste energy defending a counterfeit heterosexual-only image that we all know is a lie.

Rather than working to include lesbians in the broader women's sports agenda and to define the problem as homophobia and heterosexism, the women's athletic community has named lesbians as the problem. Instead of following the lead of the feminist movement by addressing discrimination against lesbians as a political concern affecting all women, the women's athletic community views lesbianism as a personal issue and the public acknowledgement of a lesbian presence in sport as a problem that jeopardizes the continued acceptance and progress of women's athletics.

How women's sport has responded to the issue of lesbian athletes and coaches, however, must not be judged in a vacuum. It is important to reflect on the contextual factors in athletics that affect how athletic women address lesbian issues. It is inaccurate to assume that athletic women have simply chosen to

ignore discrimination against lesbians in sport and to insist that lesbians in sport remain closeted. Sport psychologists and others outside of athletics need to understand the isolation, fear, and unique cluster of internalized messages that have created the profound lesbianphobia athletic women feel about the open acknowledgement of lesbians in sport. It is not an exaggeration to claim that the lesbianphobia in women's sport is so extreme that athletic women, lesbian and heterosexual, are completely paralyzed.

There are many reasons for this paralysis. Traditionally, gender roles in our male-dominated culture have equated athleticism with masculinity and women who compete in sport are seen as masculine. Consequently, much is made in both the popular press and scholarly publications of the conflict between athleticism and femininity. This conflict is complicated by the assumption that women who engage in sport (masculine women, by definition) are lesbians. This cluster of perceptions associated with athletic women, that they are not feminine, are masculine, are lesbian, creates a defensiveness among many athletic women about their image. Women in athletics then, regardless of their sexual orientation, must cope with the assumptions made about them by a sexist and homophobic culture.

Compounding these personal feelings of threat is a work climate that requires increasing contact with homophobic male athletic administrators, coaches, and corporate sponsors who have the power to make decisions about the future of women's sports. To hold onto the gains made in women's athletics during the

heyday of Title IX and feminism in the 70's and to guard against further assault on personal identity, many women, without conscious thought, seem to have adopted an accommodation strategy: if you'll allow us to maintain our athletic programs and keep our corporate sponsors, we'll keep our lesbians invisible and won't associate with known feminists.

Sport psychologists, both clinicians and researchers, are in a position to help create a better understanding of lesbians and homophobia in women's sport. As professionals who work with athletes and study psychological issues in sport, but are not dependent on those who control sport for their professional well-being, sport psychologists can provide important assistance and education to help women in athletics overcome their internalized homophobia and resulting paralysis around lesbian issues in sport. First, however, it is necessary to have some understanding of the effects of the extreme homophobia, which I will call lesbianphobia since it is specific to women, in women's sports. Since the lesbian experience in sport has not been studied in any systematic way, what I report is anecdotal, coming from my own experience as a lesbian coach and athlete and from those of other athletic women who are willing to talk with me about their experiences in sport.

Lesbianphobia in women's athletics wreaks havoc in silent and insidious ways. Being called a lesbian, whether true or not, can mean personal and professional disaster. An article in the Chronicle of Higher Education (1983) described how allegations of lesbianism are used to intimidate women college athletic coaches

and administrators as well as female academics. Coaches lose jobs or are never hired in the first place, sometimes based solely on innuendo or appearances. Professional athletes lose sponsors and commercial endorsements. There are rumors of a list made available to parents of prospective college athletes indicating the sexual orientation of women college coaches. Entire school programs become tainted by stories circulating that there are lesbians associated with the women's teams. Splits develop between heterosexual and lesbian athletes and coaches that affect a team's ability to play together. To dissuade recruits from considering another school unscrupulous coaches hint that opposing coaches are gay.

Some administrators and coaches have a pathological fixation with the feminine (read heterosexual) appearance of their women athletes and coaches. Some coaches have gone as far as to require make-up application seminars for their athletes (Burton-Nelson, 1984). In some schools, an unwritten job qualification for a woman coach is her being married to a man. School recruiting brochures boast of the "strong moral fiber" of their women athletes and the "wholesome friendships" the "girls" on their teams develop. One school's women's basketball brochure proclaims on the front cover, "our girls are competitors on the court and ladies everywhere else". A well known professional athlete speaking at the New Agenda For Women in Sport Conference in 1983 recommmended "protective camouflage", meaning wearing dresses, make-up, and making sure a man was displayed conspicuously in your life as a way to deflect "threats to a

woman athlete's sense of femininity". In reality femininity is a code word for heterosexuality. Lying beneath all reassurances of and insistences on women athletes projecting a feminine image is the real issue, the fear of lesbians and being associated with lesbians.

Foregoing subtlety, The Penn State women's basketball coach described her public policy of not allowing lesbians on her team in an newspaper article on lesbians in athletics (Figel, 1986). This blatantly discriminatory policy has not even created a ripple of protest among women in athletics. Two women high school coaches, who also lived together, had their house under surveillance by school district administrators searching for proof that these women were lesbians to justify their dismissal from the school district. During a college women's softball game, the team in the field was taunted from the dugout with homophobic epithets called out by the opposing team. The coach in the dugout didn't say a word to her players as they yelled such things as "dyke", "queer", "lezzie" at their opponents on the field.

In the face of such hysteria, athletic women, regardless of sexual orientation are paralyzed. Lesbian athletes, coaches and administrators are forced to lead double lives, keeping their sexual orientation carefully hidden from the public, homophobic male administrators, athletes, and opposing coaches. Heterosexual athletic women feel angry and helpless against an imposed image that they fear and reject. Is it any wonder that most women in athletics collude in a collective strategy of

silence and denial?

Unfortunately solidarity among women in athletics to counteract accusations, threats, and innuendos is limited to collective silence. The most support a lesbian in sport can expect from another woman is that she will help keep her secret. The problem for many athletic women is not necessarily that there are lesbians in sport, but the fear that the public and the men who control women's sport might find out about it and jeopardize financial and public support. Athletic women have good reason for these fears because jobs, commercial endorsements, and places on team rosters are lost in the wake of accusations of lesbianism.

In this unspoken collusion, any woman who breaks the silence is on her own. Though Billie Jean King may have enjoyed private support from her peers, she received minimal public support from her colleagues in sport when her seven year lesbian "affair" was revealed. Only Martina Navratilova, a self-identified bisexual (Navratilova & Vescey, 1985), is so outstanding an athlete at her prime that her female companions are tolerated at courtside in prim silence by the tennis establishment. Yet it is clear that Martina, despite her athletic accomplishments, does not enjoy the public support or commercial endorsement contracts she would if she were perceived as more "feminine" and heterosexual.

On an organizational level, protective camouflage and silence are used also. The few sport organizations still controlled by women (Women's Sports Foundation, National Association for Girls and Women in Sport, and small women's

college conferences), in general, ignore the issue. The New Agenda Conference in Washington nearly came apart at the seams over whether or not the word lesbian would appear in one of the resolutions calling for education and research on homophobia in sport. At a highly charged and devisive midnight meeting, over 50 lesbians finally reluctantly agreed to drop the word lesbian rather than lose the entire resolution in hopes that this might be a first step toward addressing the problem of homophobia. Unfortunately, the WSF has chosen to ignore homophobia and lesbians anyway, despite the resolution. Reportedly, a major corporate sponsor of the recent New Agenda 2 held in June agreed to sponsor the conference only with the stipulation that lesbian issues not be a part of the program. The three co-sponsoring women's sports organizations apparently consented to these terms. The recent decision by the NAGWS to sponsor a three hour homophobia workshop at the annual conference of American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation, and Dance this spring is a notable and refreshing exception to the more typical organizational response to the discussion of homophobia and lesbians in sport.

The strategy of public denial and silence works to keep women's athletics vulnerable to the threat of being associated with lesbians. Isolation and denial have also prevented athletic women from understanding and placing responsibility for the extreme lesbianphobia in sport on a sexist and homophobic culture that uses the lesbian label to keep all women in their place.

Perhaps the most tragic part of lesbianphobia in sport is

that young women athletes, who are the future leaders in sport, are socialized into the cycle of silence and denial. With closeted and homophobic women coaches, teachers, administrators, and professional athletes for role models, how can we expect the next generation of athletic women to be any more self-affirming and accepting of difference than we are? In the absence of dialogue, education, and confrontation, these young women learn that survival in women's athletics requires collusion with the conspiracy of denial and silence. Lesbians accept as a given that they must remain closeted and that being too visible, meaning being anything but invisible, is impossible. Heterosexual athletes learn to blame their lesbian teammates and coaches. They learn to condemn them or to protect them from exposure, but never to be outraged at a society that teaches fear and ignorance and then restricts all women by condemning some based on that fear and ignorance.

Given this description of homophobia in women's sports, it is clear that women athletes, lesbian and heterosexual, pay a high psychological price for their silence and denial. We ignore our responsibilities to each other as human beings. We live in ignorance, isolation, and fear. We are protecting a bogus image based on standards of femininity and heterosexuality that not only contributes to our oppression as women, but also denies the reality of our rich diversity. The psychological stress associated with maintaining a false image, living in the closet, not trusting colleagues, living in fear of losing one's job and reputation, and denying reality are enormous.

What is the responsibility of sport psychologists, researchers and clinicians, in addressing the issue of lesbians and homophobia in women's sport? If women in athletics are so enmeshed in and controlled by the homophobic and male-dominated sport governance structure that they are paralyzed by threats to their careers and personal reputations, perhaps those of us who are one step removed from direct involvement in the sport world and are perhaps less vulnerable can offer some assistance. I have several suggestions:

1. We can learn to understand our own homophobia and how it affects our work as clinical sport psychologists with women in athletics by reading, talking, and challenging ourselves to grow beyond our own socialization in a homophobic culture. There is a rich and developing literature on homophobia and gay and lesbian lives available for us in educating ourselves (Bell, Weinberg, & Hammersmith, 1981; Boswell, 1980; Darty & Potter, 1984; DeCecco, 1985; Goodman, Lakey, Lashof, & Thorne, 1983; Katz, 1976).
2. We can broaden our perspectives to expand the role of sport psychology to include addressing issues of social justice, prejudice, and discrimination in sport, especially as they relate to sexual orientation.
3. We can plan and conduct educational programs for athletes, coaches, and administrators focused on issues of diversity among athletic participants with sexual orientation being a prominent factor to be addressed along with race, gender, and class.
4. We can use professional journals to educate colleagues and legitimize an open dialogue about addressing homophobia in sport.

5. We can clarify the confusing misuse of terms related to the construction of gender in the literature. When terms such as sexual identity, sexuality, gender identity, sexual orientation, sex role orientation, masculinity, and femininity are used more or less interchangably, as they frequently are in both the popular press and academic journals, this perpetuates commonly held myths about gender that impede rather than facilitate understanding.

6. We can engage in the much needed research on the unexplored topics of homophobia in sport and the experiences of lesbians and gay men in athletics.

Research on the issues of homophobia and lesbians in sport will be more useful if grounded in the contextual experiences of women in athletics as they live and talk about their lives. Paper and pencil tests, questionnaires, and laboratory experiments do not provide the necessary depth to understand the complexities of homophobia and the variety of lesbian experiences in sport. Research from a naturalistic perspective that makes use of field studies and in-depth interviews characterized by long-term engagement with participants in the study and holds the researcher accountable for her/his own values and beliefs as part of the research process has the most promise of providing useful and reality-based descriptions.

Because the issues of lesbianism and homophobia are gender issues, this research needs to be analyzed from a theoretical perspective that takes a critical view of gender construction in our male-dominated society. Our research must not only describe

what happens in women's sports, it must also address such questions as, what function does the extreme homophobia in women's sport serve in our culture? Why does the homophobia in women's sport appear to be more repressive than in other arenas of accomplishment? Why is there such a strong association between athletics and lesbians? What is the relationship between homophobia in women's sport and the maintenance of our present gender arrangements in this culture? Research that can help lead to a better understanding of homophobia and the lesbian experience in sport might include:

1. Indepth interview studies of the experiences of lesbian athletes, coaches, or athletic administrators.
2. Field studies of the interactions among heterosexual and lesbian players on women's teams.
3. Interview studies of the experiences of heterosexual women athletes, coaches, or administrators.
4. Interview studies of women athletes' parents' perceptions of women athletes.
5. Field studies of the interactions among male and female coaches in an athletic department.
6. Interview studies of male administrators' experience with women's athletics.
7. Field studies of specific "homophobic incidents" (a firing of a lesbian coach, for example).
8. Interview studies of openly anti-lesbian women coaches or athletic administrators.

In conclusion, the need is great, the time well past, the

opportunities wide open, and sport psychologists are in a position to take action. Let's not sit back and let the next Billie Jean King struggle alone through a public hell of ignorance and prejudice. Let's not turn our backs on the many less well known women athletes, teachers, and coaches who must protect themselves daily from homophobic slander. I have a vision that the next time a well known woman athlete publicly acknowledges her lesbian identity, she will do so voluntarily, with the pride and joy of celebration rather than the shame of confession, perhaps she will have her partner by her side, and she will receive the explicit public support of her athletic colleagues, both lesbian and heterosexual. When that day comes, it will be in part because sport psychologists and other professionals in sport have helped build a bridge to that day. A bridge built on education and understanding.

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